

A Dangerous Question

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: C. Halsey, SPARTAN-B312/Noble Six

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-07-29 04:46:20

Updated: 2015-01-21 07:43:27

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:23:45

Rating: K+

Chapters: 2

Words: 2,656

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: When asked in the wrong situations, the inquiry of "what if" can shorten one's life expectancy. Secrets not meant to be shared, shadows not intended for illumination. But in the right time and right place, it can provide the smallest tweak in the fabric of what would have been. That tweak may very well be found in the young Sangheili Minor, Nepho Lehontee. UNDER HIATUS

1. Danger of Curiosity

****A/N:** Yep, yet another author's note on this story. I'll be striving more for a shorter story this time around. (Read: it'll have an actual plot) Just bear with me as I experiment with this.**

****As always,** the respective properties belong to their proper overlords.**

****IWHBYD****

Something was off with the Covenant, but Nepho Lehont didn't know what.

He started having the feeling as the lesson master recited the "Glorious History of the Covenant Empire" to him and his class. It grew during secondary school during his rehearsals of the Covenant Oath. It blossomed in tertiary school when his history professor taught them the first lesson titled, "Humanity and their Abominable nature." Why was the Covenant so bent on the destruction of this "humanity?" If the lessons were anything to go by (and Nepho had his suspicions they weren't) then humanity had supposedly attacked the Covenant first, so why were they being driven so easily?

Normally, one would pass this off as enough reason to accept the Covenant mission to eradicate all humans from the face of the galaxy. They were, after all, "infecting the universe like the virus they were." Some even went so far as to philosophy that humanity had been

this mysterious "Flood" the Forerunner archives spoke of.

But Nepho had second thoughts. For one, if humanity was such a threat, why were most engagements with them so easily won? The Covenant's technology was only a primitive imitation of Forerunner tech, yet before this very same tech, humanity was being slaughtered. Secondly, how did the Hierarchs even know that humanity was such an abomination without even having made serious effort at diplomatic contact?

At first, he attributed it to his naturally-inquisitive nature that even bordered on paranoid suspicion, at times. Unlike many young Sangheili of his age, he hadn't had dreams of becoming a warrior, acquiring rank and honor for his line with eyes on the prize of becoming a Zealot. Rather, he sought an intellectual post.

The Militaristic Induction had done little to calm his feelings of dread and misfortune. Rather than distract him, the stress and tension of training only focused and augmented his feelings. He felt it every day when the gold-armored Major barged into their barracks at 0430 hours, already dishing out insults for his "maggots," all the way through daily physical training, and it even invaded his restless dreams, taking form as shadows and shades dancing at the edge of his vision.

He didn't dare tell anyone. Not even his closest friends.

Nepho wasn't sure how much more he could take. Night after night found him up with sleep being the farthest impossibility. The scales under his eyes darkened and dulled, he felt dead on his feet, and his posture had the appearance of carrying the weight of the entire empire on his shoulders.

He tried to drown these thoughts in his training. He didn't want to be seen as useless and disposable. Those Sangheili were usually the ones that were assigned to "Honor Squads." It was said that the Honor part of the name came from one of the most glorious ways to attain honor was to die with blade in hand on the fields of battle.

They send Sangheili to die, Nepho thought with a shudder.

Nepho was up again, staring at the ceiling of the barracks. The purple metal had a couple lines of blue and green ambient energy. There was that one imperfection in his direct line of sight, like the previous occupant had tried to achieve space flight using nothing but the sleeping pad. Nepho imagined he could even see an imprint of the Sangheili's mandibles.

I should ask someone if they've heard stories of that. It'd be cool to know, he thought, spreading his mandibles in a Sangheili smile.

He glanced over at his chronometer. 0132, it read. Another sleepless night, that's what that meant.

Nepho turned to his side and tried to think of other things. His family, yes that would do.

Nepho was the older of two children, having one younger sister. Cloris was five years younger than him, and was just as inquisitive.

Unlike Nepho's interests, which lied in the realms of science, history, and archaeology, Cloris sought wisdom in the ways of religion. Her natural affinity for compassion drove her to seek an opening in the Ministry of Conversion. It was her belief that she could save lives and stop wars should she become a higher authority of that Ministry.

He smiled thinking of his sister. Her ambitions were noble and honorable. She certainly knew what she wanted and how to get it. Galactic peace was more or less the goal of everyone that was a part of the Covenant Empire, but Cloris seemed to be the only one to truly "get it."

Nepho sat up in bed and looked around at the other Sangheili in the barracks. Many of his peers had just entered their 22nd year, and Nepho was no exception. Also like many Sangheili his age, he never traveled anywhere exotic, save for the Lehont state.

His mood darkened as he thought of that place, not because it was a horrible place, though. His father and mother worked hard to provide a comfortable life for he and Cloris. Father was Kaidon of the Lehont state, having earned the post from his service in many military campaigns. The Ages of Doubt had treated the Lehont Lineage well. Even Mother, barred from many of the things the males could do, still made a significant contribution and a name for herself, albeit only known around Sangheilios. Her skill, surprising to many as she was female, was in crafting the finest of Type-1 Energy Swords for the Zealots.

Many an eye-ridge was raised at that revelation.

With a sigh, Nepho got up from his bunk and threw on his under-armor. Sleep wasn't coming to him, especially with thoughts of his father swimming in his head.

The reason Nepho didn't feel comfortable thinking of his father was his father's zealous belief in the Covenant. He would likely sell out his own son should he know of his true thoughts.

With a sigh, Nepho pulled himself from his bunk and hopped down to the ground. Turning to his footlocker, he opened it and found his rain-cloak. He stepped lightly as he passed the rows of bunks containing the forms of sleeping Sangheili, several audible snores cutting through the otherwise-still air.

Arriving at the door, he crouched to the door lock to search for the seam in the wall. Since his first night here, in which he had been unable to sleep, he had known about a small fault near the control panel which allowed access to the automatic door mechanism. Normally just walking through would open it, but not without an announcement of hissing hydraulics and mechanized beeps acknowledging egress.

Also, the door automatically logged the comings-and-goings of the Sangheili recruits, and Nepho couldn't let anyone, especially their instructor, know of his nightly excursions.

The near-quiet whine of machinery powering down signified Nepho's success. Grabbing one panel on the triangular door, he slid it into its recess and exited the barracks.

At once, the cool, dry air raised Nepho's scales as the chill overcame his exposed hide. He shivered slightly as he pulled the door closed again. As cool as it was, the temperature still felt good after the stifling heat of within the barracks. After a full day of physical training and war game simulations (with an ample amount of their instructor yelling at them on what they did wrong) it was hard for one to be otherwise.

Turning his eyes towards the twin moons, Nepho breathed deeply and began running.

AAISBGY

The peak was no different this night than it was every other time Nepho had been up here.

Moon-lit, the mostly-flat mesa of the peak was only broken up by a couple rocks that could be used as seats and a solitary deciduous tree. The tree line reached all the way up here, but stopped several yards from the edge.

Ignoring the rock-seats, Nepho instead sat on the edge and let his legs hang over the cliff face. He pulled his hood down and let his gaze wander upward to the stars.

He didn't know how long he sat there, the only indication of life was the rise and fall of his chest and the puffs of condensate breathe from his mandibles. He never knew how long he spent on the cliff staring fixedly at the stars. He wasn't even sure what he sought in the distant pinpricks of light. An answer? Relief? The Great Journey itself?

The quiet crunch of leaves reached his ears. At once, he froze in fright, immediately thinking the worst. Someone had followed him, despite his most careful measures to make sure he wasn't. Thoughts of being pushed off the cliff almost made him jerk his legs back away from the sheer face.

"I see now why you come up here every night; it's calming to the soul."

Nepho nearly dropped off the cliff right then from absolute, complete, and total horror. Desperately, he wished for an asteroid to come and wipe him from existence, or for the cliff to suddenly give way beneath him. The voice of the Imperial Admiral was impossible to mistake.

Feeling like his grave had just finished being dug, Nepho stood and turned to face the Imperial Admiral Xytan 'Jar Wattinree.

Nepho promptly held a fist to his chest and bowed his head, saying, "Admiral."

"At ease, Trainee," Xytan said, returning the salute.

Even in the moonlight, he was extremely intimidating. His silver armor reflected Nepho's stoic face as vividly as any mirror, save for the parts covered with the gold Forerunner glyphs of sacred mystery. As he had made his rounds on the training grounds, many Sangheili,

wondered what the glyphs stood for. As for himself, Nepho wondered how it was possible for a Sangheili to get that tall. Xytan towered a full two heads taller than any Sangheili, making anyone feel insignificant.

But Xytan was strange in ways different from his freakish size.

"I... I can explain, Admiral..." Nepho started.

"I'm sure you can," Xytan interrupted, "something along the lines of 'having permission for medical reasons,' perhaps."

Nepho didn't answer, but stood a little more rigid. There was no way he was going to get off blemish-free, not with the Imperial Admiral as a witness to his rule-breaking.

"Or, more realistically, you couldn't sleep because there is something on your mind. Something that hasn't been sitting well since joining the Covenant Navy," Xytan said. "Of course, these thoughts haven't been plaguing you long, otherwise your state of mind wouldn't be as stable as it is this day. Those thoughts have probably been pestering you for, oh, 7, 8 weeks. Just around the time you began your Journey in the Navy."

Again, Nepho was silent, horrified and in awe that Admiral Xytan had deduced that all so correctly.

"What's bothering you, youngling?" Xytan said, his tone carrying the weight of concern. "You appear as if you're carrying the entire weight of the world on your shoulders."

Xytan stepped closer, hunching over to bring his eyes level with Nepho's own.

"What burdens you, Minor Lehontee?"

Xytan asked the question in a low voice, almost like he was forcing sincerity into his comment. But it didn't sound forced.

Nepho wasn't sure why, but that fact alone was enough to raise his temper.

"You want to know what burdens me?" Nepho growled, "You claim to genuinely want to learn of what bothers me?"

"If it will bring you peace," Xytan said.

"Peace? You think talking about it will bring me peace?" Nepho said, "I will never have peace as long as I am fighting the war as it stands now."

Xytan's eyes changed from concerned to a stoic wall.

"Be careful where you tread, young one," Xytan said.

"Why should I be?" Nepho continued, "a war that should have lasted months, maybe years, has dragged on for more than a decade. These humans have every single odd going against them, even with their Demon allies. In every front, we should be wiping them from

existence. So why, if the Forerunners decreed their extermination, are they growing ever-harder to kill?"

When Xytan didn't answer, Nepho brought his question perhaps a step too far.

"What if the Prophets lied to us?"

The Admiral stepped back and his hand rested on his energy sword, clenching with a clear desire to put it to use right then.

At least I don't need to worry about a trial if my head is bouncing from these cliffs, Nepho said, resigning himself to the Admiral's judgment.

But he didn't hear the _snap-hiss_ of an activating blade. Instead, the Admiral said, "that is a question I dare not ponder."

Nepho looked at Xytan with confusion and maybe a little bit of hope.

"You have a lot of potential, young Nepho," Xytan said, "you could grow to become one of the best warriors among the ranks of the Covenant Empire."

The Admiral stepped closer to Nepho and he involuntarily retreated a step.

"But these thoughts you're having could very well destroy you," Xytan said darkly, "Do not ponder such things, for that is a very dangerous question. Tell no one of this and you may yet see success."

Without another word, Xytan turned and began marching down the path from the cliff edge, ending the conversation and leaving Nepho dazed. He had just told one of the highest ranks of the Sangheili leadership of his beliefs, which would no doubt be judged to be of a heretical nature. And the punishment for heresy was death.

What had possessed this Admiral to let it go?

His eyelids felt heavy, and it was a long hike back to the camp. Despite having come through a likely-fatal encounter without so much as a word of caution, Nepho couldn't think of anything besides resting his head on his bunk. The Sangheili Trainee could hardly form a coherent thought on the subject, but there was one thing clear to him.

The question he pondered was a dangerous one indeed. But who had to know of these thoughts aside from himself? And there was no guarantee the Admiral would remember this conversation, so Nepho could continue with his beliefs as long as he kept them to himself, right?

Nepho started down his own way, noticing the time was a few hours yet in coming for the wake-up call. Tomorrow, he would receive his combat harness and would graduate to the combat school. If all went well and he completed his tests to a satisfactory degree, he might, just might, be able to look into becoming a Commander of a Relic Expeditionary leader, with the rank of Major in a few short months. He had requested it as part of his military contract, and there was a notable stagnation in the scientific methodology of the current

leaders.

Little did Nepho know of the truth of the Forerunner inheritance. While he suspected the humans innocent of the abominable acts noted by the Prophets, he never imagined the discovery that would tear the very fabric of the Covenant's order.

Fate had plans, and already they were in motion.

2. AN: NOT DEAD YET

I'M NOT DEAD!

I've been REALLY plugged up on the writer's bloc and haven't had ANY motivation to write for the past half year.

BUT THERE'S GOOD NEWS!

I am finally starting to get my writing mojo back and will slowly start working on these fics again! It'll be slow going as I get back into the swing of things, but updates will happen!

Sorry I made all y'all wait this long for any signs of life, but just bear with me a little longer and I'll finally get these things
UPDATED!

End
file.